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ABSTRACT

Eastlake High School, a high school in a district in the Seattle (Washington) suburbs, opened a new campus in 1993. The school agreed to work with the Washington Research Institute to examine reform efforts in the developing school. The focus was on ensuring that the needs of special education students were being met as the school unfolded its reforms. The research project has demonstrated how a continuous cycle of focus group interviewing can be used to evaluate school improvement efforts and set the stage for introducing research-based practices. Four percent of the student body at its opening (31 students) were in special education, and 3 special education teachers were included in the school's staff of 37. A team of educators has been meeting every 2 weeks to examine the school's inclusion policies and practices, and summaries of the findings of a number of focus groups have been instrumental in the team's evaluations. The focus group methodology was less expensive than individual interviews, but it allowed students, parents, and educators to interact and express opinions about reform efforts. Over the 4 years, the team has completed 11 focus group interviews. These interviews have provided both external constituents and school personnel with insight into effective inclusion-based practices and have provided a process for understanding unified school development. (Contains 1 figure and 31 references.) (SLD)

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ED 411 305

# Using Focus Group Interviews as a Continuous and Cumulative Measure of the Effects of School Restructing and Reform

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AERA Annual Meeting
March 28, 1997
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## Introduction

Eastlake High School opened its new, multimillion dollar campus in September of 1993 with an innovative structure that reflected the best of the new thinking in secondary school reform: integrated curriculum, project based learning, portfolio assessment, block scheduling, and *full inclusion* of students with disabilities. It was the perfect research site for the 1993 Department of Education research initiative (Federal Register, 1992) which asked: How can we assure that the needs of special education students are considered at the restructuring table? Eastlake High School (and the Lake Washington School District — located in a Seattle suburb) agreed to collaborate with Washington Research Institute and look through the research microscope together as Eastlake's ambitious reform agenda unfolded over a 48 month period.

Bridging the gap between research and improved school-based practices (both in general and special education) remains one of the most complex issues facing the educational community (Gersten & Brengelman, 1996; Elmore, 1996; Gersten, Vaughn, Deschler & Schiller, 1995). One significant barrier to widespread impact of educational research may be that researchers lack a deep understanding of teachers and classroom dynamics (Shavelson, 1988). The gap between research and practice is complicated by time constraints on teachers: there is virtually no time in the school day for teachers to reflect, and collaborate for school improvement.

Our research project at Eastlake High School, now in its fourth and final year, has demonstrated how a continuous cycle of focus group interviewing can be used to evaluate school improvement efforts and set the stage for introducing research-based practices. Focus

groups can respond to the needs of an "internal audience" (school staff and administrators) and the interests of "external audiences" (other researchers and schools). Providing feedback and information derived from focus groups to the "internal audience" shapes existing programs and creates a demand for practices that respond to evaluation data. Since evidence of program performance is immediately at hand, school staff are primed to import tested practices from the research community. For external audiences, focus group data can be subjected to rigorous qualitative analysis methods in order to derive theories and a deeper understanding of school reform and restructuring.

## The Research Setting

Like most new high schools, Eastlake did not open with a full complement of students. The student body included thirty-one students (4% of the student body) with learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, behavior disorders, mild mental retardation, and orthopedic impairments. Three special education teachers were included in the staff of thirty-seven. Located in an upper middle class suburb twenty miles east of Seattle, the school became the fourth high school in the 23,000 student Lake Washington School District. This growing district has been engaged in an ambitious educational reform agenda for over ten years. The primary result of restructuring efforts is a district wide "Student Profile" that identifies key indicators for each content area and grade. "Key indicators" describe the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and goals for all district graduates. A comprehensive set of "Curriculum Frameworks" specifies what all students should know and do to achieve the goals outlined in the Student Profile. Curriculum planning, instructional strategies, staff development, and assessment practices for *all* students are based on these frameworks. Teachers are currently

aligning their curriculum and instruction with the framework levels prescribed for their grade or content areas. All IEP goals and objectives for students with disabilities are being correlated with the framework's key indicators.

The District Context

The needs of students with disabilities have been on the agenda in all district and school decision making throughout the reform process. Early in the planning process, the Board of Directors, the superintendent and the director of special services made a commitment to assuring that the Curriculum Frameworks applied to *all* students in the district. Specific support strategies are available for students achieving beyond and below the framework's benchmark levels. A description of support strategies is included in all materials disseminated to staff, parents, and the community. For students with disabilities who are performing at levels *below* the benchmark in the student profile and curriculum frameworks, the following supports are available:

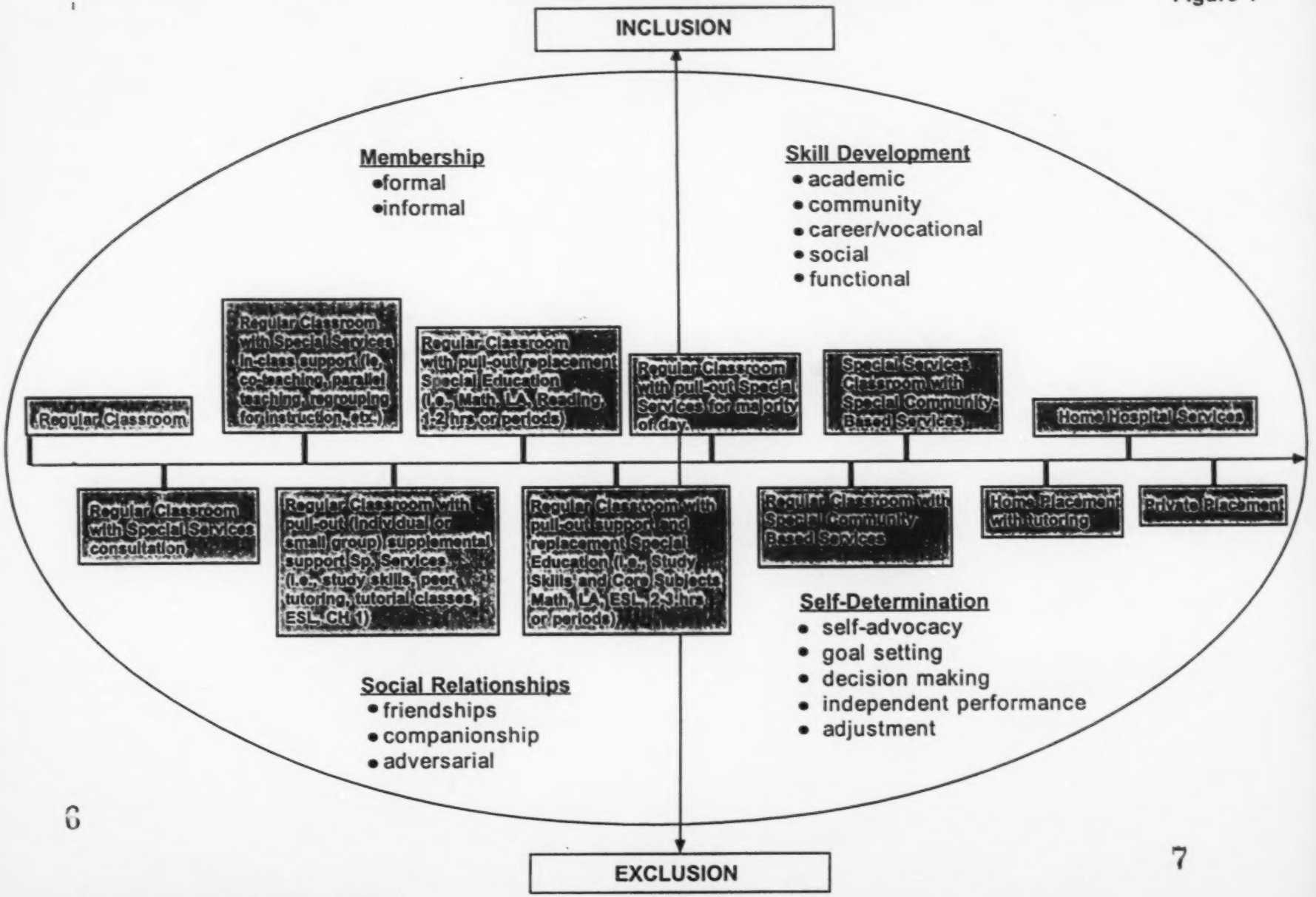
- preschool early intervention
- in-class assistance
- specialists outside the classroom
- before and after school programs
- summer programs
- self-contained services
- alternative placements

The district's commitment to inclusive schools is grounded in maintaining a school-based "continuum of special service delivery options" that meet the educational and social needs of students with disabilities. The twelve general service options that comprise this continuum have been combined with four student outcome domains to form an "inclusion-outcome based dynamic" (Figure 1).

# The Inclusion - LRE Outcome Based Dynamic
## Lake Washington School District

DRAFT

Figure 1


INCLUSION
Membership
•formal
•informal
Skill Development
• academic
• community
• career/vocational
• social
• functional
Regular Classroom
Regular Classroom with Special Services In-class support (ie, co-teaching, parallel teaching, regrouping for instruction, etc.)
Regular Classroom with pull-out/replacement Special Education (i.e., Math, LA, Reading 1-2 hrs or periods)
Regular Classroom with pull-out Special Services for majority of day
Special Services Classroom with Special Community-Based Services
Home Hospital Services
Regular Classroom with Special Services consultation
Regular Classroom with pull-out (individual or small group) supplemental support Sp. Services (i.e., study skills, peer tutoring, tutorial classes, ESL, CH 1)
Regular Classroom with pull-out support and replacement Special Education (i.e., Study Skills and Core Subjects Math, LA, ESL 2-3 hrs or periods)
Regular Classroom with Special Community Based Services
Home Placement with tutoring
Private Placement
Social Relationships
• friendships
• companionship
• adversarial
Self-Determination
• self-advocacy
• goal setting
• decision making
• independent performance
• adjustment
EXCLUSION





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District personnel and the teachers' professional organization collaborated in preparing a set of guiding principles for inclusion that guide each school's effort to identify service delivery options. These principles are: 1) all placement decisions are based on the academic, social, physical, language, and vocational/prevocational needs of the student; 2) classes are formed by balancing student needs, demands on teacher time, and available resources; 3) the location of services is justified by student needs; and 4) the school's special education personnel will support the student in regular classrooms or in other settings.

The district's commitment to educating *all* students in their neighborhood schools, along with the array of service delivery systems designed by each school community, is the foundation for the district's approach to inclusion.

It is important to understand that the special services programs in the district operate under basic beliefs that were *jointly* developed by general and special education communities. These beliefs include: special education is an integral part of the total education system (not a separate entity); students will be educated in age-appropriate settings with non-disabled peers; programs are designed to meet individualized student learning needs; and the design and implementation of programs is a shared responsibility of educators, parents, and the community. These school district-wide contextual issues, the relationship between general and special education, the delivery of special services, and the carefully crafted definition of inclusion set the stage for the opening of Eastlake High School, our research site for the past three-and-a-half years.

The Eastlake High School Context

All projects funded for this particular research initiative were to be situated in schools already engaged in substantive restructuring. The funding agency also required that projects "demonstrate a commitment to both systemic change as well as the adoption of effective professional practices that would address diversity and complexity of the learning needs of children with disabilities" (Federal Register, 1992). Eastlake High School, which was scheduled to open in the fall of 1993, met these criteria. The newly appointed principal, Ms. Katherine Siddoway, identified sixteen basic orienting premises upon which the new school would be grounded. These principles expressed basic beliefs about how students learn, how instruction is best organized, and the staff attributes required to implement these beliefs. A year of visiting exemplary high school programs across the nation, consulting with experts in school restructuring and reform (e.g. Theodore Sizer), and talking with the Eastlake community were instrumental in helping Ms. Siddoway shape these premises. Early in the planning process, Ms. Siddoway made a strong personal commitment to educating students in inclusive settings: they would be included and welcomed in all aspects of Eastlake's program. She spoke about the school's inclusive approach at public meetings with parents and professional audiences. When she interviewed prospective teachers, she always asked about their ability and willingness to instruct students with a full range of abilities — including those with disabilities.

Eastlake's vision, beliefs, and goals for all students. A core of newly hired staff met regularly for the six months prior to the opening of the school. The language of the vision, beliefs, and goals they developed did not speak specifically to students with disabilities, but

such word choices as "every learner," "all students," "student centered," "each person," "each student," "meet the varied needs of all students," document a desire to create a more unified school community. The special education department head was a strong and persuasive voice for Eastlake's commitment to inclusion. As the first year staff developed their governance structure, a representative from the special education area was included in all school committees and governing bodies to insure that the needs of students with disabilities were considered in the evolving school community.

The school's first annual report card, published in June of 1994 and disseminated to all homes throughout the district, affirms the school's ongoing commitment to inclusion:

> "Eastlake High School is committed to providing students with IEP's the support necessary to succeed in regular classroom settings. All students with IEPs* are currently enrolled in general education classes with support from the three special education teachers. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents are actively involved in identifying effective instructional and collaborative practices aimed at meeting the needs of all students with IEPs in inclusive settings."
> *(Authors' note: students with IEPs are students with disabilities.)

Benefits to the research site. Both Eastlake High School and the Lake Washington School District welcomed the opportunity to become part of this research initiative as long as it would provide real benefits to students and staff. They anticipated that the research agenda, methodologies, and technical assistance provided over a multiyear time frame would create a unique opportunity for Eastlake teachers and district administrators to test and refine their restructuring efforts.

The school community saw the project's potential to "blur the boundaries" between research and practice by helping them infuse systematic inquiry into the school's professional culture of teaching and program design; empower teachers to identify and resolve more of

their own school problems; and create engagement with the educational research community (Hargreaves 1996). The project offered the school district the opportunity to establish and support a school/researcher partnership that would effectively connect these two worlds. The project would bring together teaching and research where interests and assumptions could be bridged (Watson & Fullen, 1992).

**Overcoming Research to Practice Barriers**

Project researchers were charged with using research findings to influence inclusive systems development through joint planning by general and special educators. To accomplish this researchers had to devise a continuous method for Eastlake teachers to examine student and system wide impacts. District administrators also stressed that innovations influenced and shaped by the project be sustainable upon termination of external project funding. The primary question as we initiated activities was, how can project-influenced, system wide innovations and best practices be designed so they are adapted and sustained by Eastlake staff?

Woodward (1993) describes several critical components likely to be needed to ensure sustainability. Among the most important is the opportunity for teachers to regularly meet and work together in order to reflect on how these practices affect student learning, instruction, and can best be systematically internalized. Collegial networks are needed to support this internalization and the continued use of best practices. The dilemma facing Eastlake and project staff was how to create a system of collaboration that is valued by staff members, outcome oriented, and makes the most efficient use of teacher time in order to enhance sustainability.

The Special Issues and Options Team (SIOT): Creating a Collegial Network

Eastlake's ambitious agenda of reform and inclusion required a framework that would support collaboration between general and special educators. A team of general education teachers, special education staff, and key administrators was formed to meet regularly and continuously examine the school's inclusion policies and practices. Composed of general education teachers, special education staff and key administrators, the Special Issues and Options Team (SIOT) has met every two weeks since the project's inception. The SIOT derived its name from the work of McLaughlin and Warren (1992) who described a process for considering key issues that need to be addressed at the restructuring table if the needs of students with disabilities are to be met. Each of the five key issues is supported by several implementation groups options:

1. Developing a clear vision and mission for education that includes all students;
2. Establishing a system of accountability for all educational programs;
3. Creating an organization that supports the mission of restructuring;
4. Changing what schools teach and how they teach it; and
5. Creating supports for staff development and staff renewal. (p. 5)

Eastlake's SIOT was formed to explore these issues within a local, school-based context. The team has also became a forum for strategic planning to create a more unified high school system. The McLaughlin and Warren (1992) process is based on a decision making process that reflects the values and input of all stakeholders in the school community. The SIOT was given the responsibility to fulfill this important requirement and become a highly influential school team.

The SIOT is composed of one representative from each of the school's curriculum and support areas (Special Education, Humanities, Technology, Math, Business, Science, and

Electives), the principal (who oversees special education), and a district special education coordinator. The team is facilitated by the research project director. The team also plays a role in keeping the research project on track. They help assure that project activities continue to reflect local values and priorities with regard to inclusionary practices. Meeting every two weeks after their last class, team activities have included:

- identifying local issues, options, and strategies centering on the inclusion of students with disabilities.
- revising project activities to reflect the needs of the high school as it matures and grows.
- presenting the project to school staff and members of the greater school community.
- reviewing school policies and practices for practices and features that support inclusion.
- reviewing and selecting effective secondary special education program and curricula features.
- developing student assessment strategies that are compatible with those being developed for all students.
- reviewing requests for project funding that focus on staff development, materials and professional library acquisitions, and planning time.
- determining the need for outside experts to assist in curricular development and consultation.
- disseminating project results and general information throughout the school and district.

Summaries of focus group findings were instrumental in shaping the SIOT's direction for many of these activities.

## Why Use Focus Groups?

Our four-year project aims to contribute to both a federal and local research agenda. We designed methods and research objectives that would provide answers to the central federal question—*How can we assure that the needs of students with disabilities are considered at the restructuring table and improve reform efforts by infusing research-based special education practices into the school's program?*—and the central local question—*What*

*organizational structures, programs, practices and policies need to be in place to support all students with disabilities in a unified system?*

We used a variety of data collection venues to capture a complete picture of the evolution of a restructured, unified system for educating high school students. Our portfolio of research methods includes traditional qualitative data sources: written and in-person surveys; document collection and analysis; notes from school and district level meetings; interviews with key personnel; and student outcome data (e.g., GPAs, credits earned, program participation, attendance, etc.). We also borrowed the focus group interview from the field of marketing (via communications and health arenas) as a major data collection method.

Focus Groups as a Research and Evaluation Tool

Like many methods that don't produce numerical data for statistical analysis, focus groups are being included more often in the tool chests of educational and psychological researchers (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). The debate over using "squishy" methods in educational research is still lively. Increasingly, however, researchers are recognizing the utility of qualitative methods as a complement to quantitative designs (Schwartz, Staub, Gallucci, & Peck, 1994; Crowley, 1994). Crowley (1994) makes the case that "qualitative methods have a distinct and credible role in special education" (p.59) because they can address some of the most pressing questions we face. For example, research that addresses inclusion needs to carefully examine classroom and school contexts, a pursuit that is particularly suited to qualitative methods. While a priori hypotheses are essential to quantitative research, their frequent absence in qualitative research allows us to more carefully examine and in fact "discover" some of the more covert workings of a particular

context. In fact qualitative methods provided us with the opportunity to go into an inclusive setting without knowing all of the answers. And to be surprised by the obvious and covert workings of that context. Qualitative methods are a good match for a field where individualization is a fundamental concept because they are particularly suited to in-depth study of the perceptions, beliefs, and interpretations of individuals.

Focus groups, frequently considered the province of Madison Avenue, are being employed more frequently in educational studies. (See for example Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher & Saumell, 1996; York & Tundidor, 1995.) Like all qualitative methods they can bring a greater depth of understanding by focusing on the perceptions of individual stakeholders or in this case, stakeholder groups. Since focus groups have a clear structure and are organized around a carefully developed discussion guide, they may be more acceptable to traditional educational researchers who are more comfortable using more structured tools (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). At the same time, focus groups fit within the qualitative paradigm (Brotherson, 1994).

Benefits for educational research. Of particular interest to us is the power of focus groups to promote interactive discussions among key school stakeholders that reveal new, explanatory information. A lively group discussion can foster new opinions or reinforce previous opinions (Packard & Dereshiwsky, 1990). Extended conversations that examine beliefs, perceptions, and experiences offer one of the best opportunities for understanding a topic (Lederman, 1990). The focus group format allowed us to select a topic (or topics) and officially "eavesdrop" on conversations among carefully selected groups of stakeholders. In

this way, we became privy to the dynamic, synergistic interactions that were laden with examples and explanations from the perspective of people with direct, fresh experience.

Frequently, our lively focus group discussants revealed information that was completely unexpected. For example, in one of our parent groups a concern was raised over the possibility of grade inflation. One parent raised the issue by expressing concern that his son had been bringing home uncharacteristically high grades since he entered Eastlake High School while at the same time doing little or no homework (also a change from the prior year). This single comment resulted in a long and detailed discussion of grading standards where parents explored the validity of the grades they were seeing. As special education researchers we were prepared to hear laments about *low* grades. We were very surprised to hear concerns about high grades instead. Several other parents told us that Eastlake High School has very high standards and student grades were a valid assessment of these standards.

Including focus groups in our research portfolio helped us tap into one the most valuable sources of information for understanding inclusive programs: students, school staff, and parents. Carefully reviewing the exact words of front line participants reveals much about what people actually think, and helps bring a depth of understanding not available through casual observation and reflection (Waite, 1993). The format lets people actually think out loud allowing the researcher to understand why a particular opinion is held. Many times we are more interested in what supports the opinion than in the exact opinion itself. For example, several of our special education students told us in surveys and in a Year 1 focus group, that they did not like having peer tutors in content area classes. Through careful

examination of this problem with the SIOT and subsequent focus groups with teachers, we found that peer tutors were assigned haphazardly, at the last minute and too obtrusively for student comfort. Focus group discussions helped identify the problem and provided a forum for clarification and understanding where surveys did not. From the platform of a deeper understanding, plans were made to solve the problem and an exemplary peer tutoring program was carefully designed with training for students and teachers. Subsequent surveys and focus group data indicates students now find this support highly effective and welcome.

This level of depth is particularly important in a study of inclusion where the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of stakeholders significantly affect the content and success of the program. Inclusion is a value laden and emotional topic.

The high cost of individual interviews — a more traditional qualitative approach — was certainly a factor in selecting focus groups. The group interview method gave us the opportunity to have direct contact with key informants at a reasonable cost. However, in hindsight we are finding that the strength of the focus group format goes beyond being able to interview many people at one time. We have found (like Hess, 1968) that focus groups have advantages over individual depth interviewing. The most obvious benefit is the synergy created by the interaction of focus group participants, described above. However, we have also benefited from other aspects identified by Hess. The group setting provided a secure atmosphere, which was particularly evident among the student focus groups. We were pleasantly surprised that students with and without disabilities were open and frank—even eager to talk—despite the presence of their peers, a tape recorder and two unfamiliar adults. A chain reaction or "snowballing" effect was common among all of the groups. A key

comment by one participant would create a chain of related, additional comments, examples and insights—letting us develop the depth of understanding we were seeking.

The focus group setting also promotes greater spontaneity than individual interviews. And this spontaneity increased over the course of each group meeting. For example, jokes, off-hand remarks, and facetious comments can be very revealing or open the door to in-depth exploration of a sensitive topic. These rarely occur in an individual depth interview. However, in a group setting they are quite common and instructive.

How Focus Groups Enhanced the Research Approach

Focus groups helped buttress our research methods by creating a forum where diverse views and opinions are honored and encouraged. Our research questions were best addressed by a phenomenological approach that recognizes that multiple views of reality can exist. Using a phenomenological approach helped us understand inclusion from the perspective of specific subgroups (Lindgren & Kehoe, 1981), in our case parents, students and various teacher groups.

Focus group findings helped us fulfill our mission to influence the study site's inclusive program. Sharing the findings with school staff helped us develop, test and support hypotheses that integrate theoretical principles and best practice with study site phenomena. This is a common use of focus group results (Cohen & Engelberg, 1989; Krueger, 1986). For example, early in the implementation of inclusive services general education teachers revealed that they had little or no information about the needs (e.g., accommodations and instructional modifications) and strengths of students with disabilities in their classrooms. Some even contended that "not knowing" was very helpful because it reduced bias on their part. Most wished they knew more. Some teachers believed that this type of information sharing was illegal

and violated the students' privacy rights. These discussions confirmed the need for a systematic method of sharing information and clarified the educational needs of teachers with regard to the usefulness and accessibility of the information on individual students. This finding opened the door to providing technical assistance in developing a "Student Profile Summary"—a vehicle and process for sharing student specific information with general education teachers.

Focus group data and emerging findings also gave us the opportunity to enhance the trustworthiness of our total data set and evolving perceptions (Guba, 1981) by conducting formal and informal "member checks" of our findings (Miles & Huberman, 1996). Triangulation was eased because our data systems promoted quick comparison of findings across data sources. Focus groups served as a forum for member checks where we confirmed and expanded our hypotheses and findings. They also facilitated complementary iterative cycles by providing feedback to planners about the concerns and perceptions of various stakeholders. Findings and summaries were regularly verified (and acted upon) by the school-based inclusion planning team (Special Issues and Options Team—SIOT). For example, an analysis of GPA, attendance and credit accumulation data showed that 10th grade students with IEPs are at particular risk for failure. (Eastlake is a three-year high school and 10th grade is the entry year for most students.) In order to learn more about this phenomenon, we set up a focus group interview with 10th grade special education students to explore junior high to senior high transition difficulties. (See Appendix A for a summary of this discussion.)

In the other direction, key focus group themes were regularly presented to the SIOT and other key school and district personnel for verification and expansion. Enthusiastic math teachers in our Year 1 focus group told us that while students with IEPs might struggle in Algebra, they

didn't seem to have problems in Geometry. A careful examination of actual student achievement data by the SIOT revealed that the finding was more wishful thinking than fact.

Addressing Limitations

Data derived from focus group discussions reveal the attitudes, perceptions, experiences and beliefs from the diverse viewpoints of the focus group participants. Our intent (and the intent of any responsible focus group summation) is to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomena and issues of interest to us and to document the context in which they occur. Our intent is not to use focus group information to generalize directly to other settings. However, our findings are helping us understand other inclusive settings and can provide guidance to other secondary programs attempting to develop or refine a unified system. We can help others learn from the good ideas and missteps we have documented by explaining *why* and *how* certain things occurred over time at one, high school site. Indeed, the key issues we have identified such as grading and evaluation, roles and responsibilities, and communication have emerged in our "sister" projects around the country.

Over a four year period we will have completed eleven focus group interviews. We wish that we could have conducted more but were limited by resources. For example, our student data bank could be strengthened by several additional meetings. We would like to meet with graduates with disabilities who have exited the program or to conduct more meetings with students who do not have disabilities. The range of disabilities among the students we were able to interview in focus groups was somewhat limited because the study site is just now beginning to serve students with moderate to severe disabilities. As it stands now, our findings have not

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adequately considered students with more significant disabilities. Wanting to return to the well once again, however, is a common end-of-project concern that we surely share in.

We also would have liked to meet with special educators in different combinations with general educators. However, these hypothetical meetings were not limited so much by cost as by dynamics. Mixing special educators in with other groups would in almost every case suppress spontaneity and candid discussion. (In only one case did we include a special educator in a focus group with general education teachers.) In all cases our participants were very professional in their comments about colleagues, both present and absent. However, we feel strongly that even these comments would have been constrained by the presence of a possible "perpetrator" in a focus group meeting. For example, one of the most nagging problems was the sense among general educators that they were not receiving adequate or promised support from the special education staff. This issue was very sensitive among both groups of teachers and was best explored in separate focus groups since the intent of focus groups was not to help "cross the divide"—we had devised other avenues for that—but to *understand* the divide.

To help promote candor and genuineness all groups were assured that their remarks were confidential and not attributable to them as individuals. All meetings were tape recorded and transcribed, verbatim. After the meeting, no one but the research team would hear the tape or read the transcription. This process was discussed at the beginning of each meeting. Despite the obvious signals (e.g., microphones, tape shuffling at 30 minute intervals), we found that participants were very talkative, spontaneous, and open. Our benchmark for this is students with disabilities. We conducted three focus groups with students with IEPs and each time we were

pleasantly surprised with students' willingness to talk openly –sometimes about sensitive personal issues.

### SIOT Involvement in Focus Group Planning and Reflection

The SIOT assisted us in using focus group interviews to collect data and to increase the validity of our findings. This team of school staff helped us answer two sets of reciprocal questions that are at the heart of understanding and improving the relationships between teaching, educational research, and educational change (Hargreaves, 1996):

1. What use is university-based (external) research knowledge to teachers? How can it be made more useful?
2. What use is the knowledge of individual teachers, to other educators as well as themselves? How can it be made more useful? (p. 105)

We assumed that Eastlake teachers, students, and parents had valuable knowledge, perceptions, and opinions that needed to be captured and shared with both internal and external audiences. The SIOT helped us identify specific areas to probe based on their day-to-day experience with restructuring and inclusion. Focus group findings were also shared with others — school staff, administrators, other researchers — in a format that suited their specific needs. Our design was strengthened because the SIOT had ongoing personal contact with teachers, students, and parent focus group participants. As Fullen (1981) recommends, they had shared opportunities over time to interact with the findings, interpret these findings to colleagues, and identify ways to best utilize the findings locally. This bottom-up knowledge utilization process is in contrast to more traditional top-down reform practices that rarely match the varied and often unpredictable contexts in which they must be applied (Louis and Dentler, 1988). Louis and Dentler (1988) advocate "school focused knowledge utilization" where those most directly involved in

developing and implementing school reforms are provided some external assistance in collecting and analyzing data. The SIOT viewed focus group interviewing as a highly valued process of collecting and analyzing information that they could use to inform and assist program improvement. Indeed, the SIOT became a highly reflective body that used focus group findings to address the challenges of inclusion that captured the realities of day-to-day school life.

## Planning and Preparation

Training the moderator. We did extensive planning and preparation for our first focus group. (The stakeholder groups and key issues/topics for the first year of the project had already been identified.) Recognizing the importance of a trained moderator, we brought in a very experienced focus group moderator to coach us through our first focus group interviews. Initial planning for the focus group involved discussion and reading for both the experienced moderator (to familiarize her with the issues) and for the moderator-in-training (in preparation for taking on the role of moderator.) Together, the consultant, and project staff (including the neophyte moderator) developed a series of draft discussion guides until a final guide was agreed upon. This process helped all parties understand their roles and the goals of the first focus group. The neophyte moderator conducted the first focus group with extensive up-front coaching from the consultant. The consultant attended the focus group and later debriefed the moderator in training. She also guided the research team as they developed a written summary of this focus group for SIOT discussion purposes. The consultant worked with the research team to develop discussion guides for two, subsequent focus groups.

Developing the discussion guide. Our first discussion guide, was structured around key issues in creating a unified system based on the work of McLaughlin and Warren (1992). The major

areas covered in our original discussion guides included: 1) vision and beliefs; 2) relationship of school organization to vision and beliefs; 3) the teaching experience; 4) student outcomes; and 5) roles, responsibilities and relationships. Over time, the discussion guides evolved and became more focused as we learned more about the study site, exhausted certain topics, and started using focus groups as a vehicle for triangulation as well as generating new information.

Discussion guides were reviewed by different groups prior to use. The SIOT, special education staff, principal, special education director and others were asked to comment on discussion guides. Early in the project this helped us target topics that were important to stakeholders and clarify our growing knowledge of the study site. Later, review of the discussion guides by key stakeholders served as a sort of member check and helped us assess the importance of specific issues and even the awareness of key stakeholders about particular issues or problems. This process also helped build investment in the focus group process and results among stakeholders.

Selecting stakeholder groups and constituents. For each of the first two years of the project we conducted focus groups for the following stakeholder groups: 1) special education teachers; 2) general education teachers; 3) students with IEPs; and 4) parents of students with IEPs. In the third and fourth years of the project we carefully targeted groups based on the information we needed to collect or verify. For these two years focus groups were held with: science and math teachers (including the special education teacher designated to support these disciplines); tenth grade students with IEPs; and general education students. (One more focus group that will query "veteran" Eastlake teachers who have been at the school since it's opening, will be conducted in 1997.)

Participants in each focus group were carefully selected. We followed some of the traditional rules ( See Krueger, 1994; or Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996 for a review of selection criteria) for selecting focus group participants and adapted some rules for the particular needs of our research. In many cases we selected participants who were fairly homogeneous along dimensions related to their school roles (e.g., students with IEPs or teachers of math and science). In all cases, we asked school staff for assistance in selecting focus group participants. For example, we asked special education teachers to assist us in selecting general education teachers who could best help answer our discussion guide probes. This provided special education teachers with some ownership of the process. They were also very interested in the perceptions and practices of general education teachers so they participated in selecting participants and developing discussion questions. (As we became a part of the school climate, we were able to make these selections ourselves.) In the case of teachers, the pool was fairly limited so strict selection criteria were not appropriate (e.g., selecting on the basis of gender, expertise, age).

For each of the four student focus groups we sought a mix of gender, disability type, age (except in the case of our tenth grade group), GPA and engagement as measured by attendance. We also sought the advice of special education teachers. They helped us rule out students who were not likely to talk at all. We usually ended up with a group of 20-25 students to choose from. We found that if we invited all of them, we would end up with an ideal group of 8-12 students. Student groups were held before school on the one day per week that classes start late. We provided students with the additional enticement of food and $10 in cash.

In our first year the focus group for parents of students with IEPs proved the most problematic. Our study site was a high school in the first year of operation and did not have a full complement of students. This resulted in a very limited number of parents of students with IEPs to choose from so we invited all of them. We held the focus group in the evening from 7:00 to 8:00 in the meeting room of an area motel. We provided an ice cream buffet which proved very unpopular and proceeded to melt during the heated discussion that ensued. First, we inadvertently attracted parents who were experiencing the most difficulties. Opening a new school always results in added problems for some families. Added to this was the unavoidable rocky start-up of innovative programs—restructuring, reform, integrated curriculum, and inclusion. One parent expressed the general feeling, "We feel like guinea pigs." These parents also faced the daily demands of dealing with children who were struggling or failing in school and they held the school partly responsible for these failures. Further, by selecting an off-site location for this meeting we (again inadvertently) appeared as independent listeners whose role was to help shape the school up. Our problems were compounded when following the meeting, word spread rapidly that we had held a secret parent meeting. It took some time and effort to explain our reasons and findings to the school staff. All subsequent meetings were held at the school! This was a selection process we did not repeat.

For our Year 2 parent group we had a much larger pool of parents to select from. We received help from the special education staff and prepared selection criteria that would assure a better mix of parents with a representative group of students: successful and unsuccessful; different grade levels; diverse disabilities; and different school experiences. The parent participants were particularly helpful because most had another child (some with IEPs and some

without) for comparison.

Traditionally, focus group participants are strangers to one another because anonymity promotes more fruitful discussion (Fern, 1982). However, we were most often unable to select participants who were strangers to one another. Obviously, the teachers all knew each other. Students were usually a mixed group but even if they were strangers when they entered the room they were not when they left since they all participate in the same school community. Among the parents in our focus groups we found very few social relationships, if any.

Assuring a quorum. In all cases we invited focus group participants in writing. School staff received a memo. Students invitees' parents received a letter of invitation and permission slip via the mail. Parents received written invitations in the mail. We chose the mail to assure that letters arrived home. Telephone, electronic quick-mail and in person follow-up were all used (and we think necessary) to assure attendance. Special education teachers made a point to invite students with IEPs personally before a letter was sent home. They also reminded students to attend. Project staff made contact with students through phone calls to parents and voice mail the day before the focus group. Teachers were also reminded to attend via quick-mail and in-person contacts with project staff. Parents received a phone message the day before the meeting.

Conducting the focus groups. All focus groups (except the ill-fated motel meeting) were held on the high school campus in staff conference rooms. Refreshments were provided. The moderator was always assisted by an aide (the project director) who helped greet participants and set up the recording equipment. All focus groups were audio recorded. Focus groups lasted 90 minutes but were sometimes a bit shorter due to a large number of late arrivals. At the

conclusion of many focus groups we also administered a short, written survey as a quick group member check or to gather additional information.

## Results and Analysis

Our dual purpose focus group data required two different forms of analysis. First, we needed to provide immediate feedback in the form of *description* to the SIOT and other stakeholder groups for program development and fine tuning. This required a quick, descriptive summary of major findings. Second, we needed to develop explanations of processes and consequences of Eastlake's four year restructuring and inclusion initiative for a broader audience (e.g., other researchers, other secondary schools). For this purpose we used traditional qualitative analysis methods which provides a cumulative picture and allowed us to make and verify inferences that go beyond simple description.

For the purpose of providing *descriptive information* to stakeholders we used an abbreviated qualitative summary process. After the recorded interview was transcribed we identified major themes that emerged from the interview with selected quotations. We simply reported these themes and did not attempt to interpret or infer from the data at this point. These themes were summarized, supporting examples were found and illustrative quotes were selected. Then, we prepared a short summary, in a newsletter format for dissemination (Appendix A). Summaries were shared with the SIOT, school staff, central office administrators, and other projects around the state and nation. They are snapshots of current issues described in the words of focus group members.

For our broader audience, we used accepted methods of qualitative analysis to develop and verify theories that explain the setting and help answer questions about "why" and "how." This

included developing and assigning codes, preparing theoretical memos, bounding data collection with a conceptual framework and constantly revising and verifying our findings. We used a grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) in that we did not have predetermined categories or "codes" for organizing our raw data prior to data collection. We did however, have a sort of mental "code start list" (Miles & Huberman, 1986) based on our prior understanding of inclusion at the secondary level and our research agenda.

Codes are labels that are assigned to chunks of text. They are shorthand for descriptive or inferential meaning found in a specific unit of text –anywhere from a few words to many sentences (Miles & Huberman, 1996). For example, we attached codes (labels) to important statements or discussions about things like evaluation and grading ("EVAL") and teacher roles ("ROLES"). Hence, many obvious, anticipated codes fell out of the data easily. Others were less obvious to us at the start but emerged through careful reading and considerations of the text, followed by triangulation with other data sources (e.g., surveys, documents, meetings.) (See Appendix B for a list of current codes and their definitions.)

Initially master codes and subcodes were developed by the focus group moderator, in consultation with the project director. The focus group moderator coded several interviews using these codes. Then, the project staff met to assign codes to sections of text as a group. This process led to a refinement of the code list (some were dropped, some were added) and beginning definitions of each code. Group coding of interview data had several purposes. First, it provided an excellent forum for project staff to meet and discuss issues identified in the focus groups and related these to our larger research questions. Second, coding as a group helped us verify our emerging theories and explanations. Through these discussions, each of us brought our

experience in the research site to bear on the data. Third, our discussions led us to a shared understanding of what particular codes were designed to describe or capture, thus leading to greater consistency in the assignment of codes to text.

After project staff were familiar with the codes and had reached consensus on definitions, the remaining pages of text were assigned to different staff members to code independently. The focus group moderator coded all text so that at least two project staff reviewed and coded all data. Following the independent coding of text segments, the staff person assigned to a particular data segment would meet with the focus group moderator to review coding as a two-person team. The first task of the joint review was to verify code assignment of particular portions of text. In other words, we assessed if the two reviewers were deriving the same meaning from a given sections of text.

During the joint review we assessed our coding accuracy in terms of code selection (What theme does this section of text help explain?) and in terms of length of interview segment assigned a particular code (How much of the text do we need to capture in order to preserve the meaning?). At the end of each joint coding session we calculated reliability to get an idea of our shared accuracy in selecting and interpreting text. Our joint coding pretty much took care of reliability issues by creating a forum for "interrater discussion" and agreement thereby streamlining our coding process.

The most important function of our joint coding sessions, however, was to discuss the actual content of the interviews and how the information could help increase our understanding of the research setting and confirm the validity of our developing understandings. Calculating reliability documented consensus, or agreement over time and set the stage for drawing

conclusions buttressed by a long-term, shared understanding of events in the research site. Our reliability checks were not intended to prepare individual staff members to code data independently. We felt that joint coding and extensive discussion were essential to developing a well grounded understanding of the research site.

We are using The Ethnograph 3.0 (Siedel, 1994) software program to sort coded segments of text. (Data collection and analysis are still in progress.) For example, The Ethnograph can sort all segments of text that are tagged with the "EVAL" code so they can be read together. After viewing the like codes together, we develop theoretical memos where tentative theories or inferences are made and refined. These Code Analyses are reviewed by the district special services administrative teams, the SIOT, and other staff at Eastlake to assess validity and obtain confirmation, expansion or disconfirmation. These reports and the theories and explanations they contain will be shared with the research community at the conclusion of data analysis.

Examples of Translating from Group Findings to Improved Practice

Three issues identified in early focus groups gave direction to the SIOT in improving programs and policies:

- The clear identification of **teacher roles and responsibilities** with regard to students with IEPs.
- **Grading and evaluation standards and options** for students using instructional accommodations or curriculum modifications.
- The availability of appropriate **career/vocational program options** for all students.

These three issues presented direct barriers to meeting the needs of students with disabilities at Eastlake and promoting maximum successful participation in general education curriculum

settings. As we brought focus group summary findings to the SIOT, they clearly identified these areas as needing immediate attention. The results of the SIOT's interventions in regard to each of these three issues is described below.

Identification and Clarification of Teacher Roles

The focus group discussion guides have always asked school staff about their roles, responsibilities and collegial relationships. The Center for Policy Options in Special Education at the University of Maryland (McLaughlin & Warren, 1992) raises this as one of six critical issues in school restructuring efforts. It was clear as Eastlake administrators and teachers planned for the school's opening that staff members would be defining new roles and relationships for themselves — not solely as a result of their commitment to inclusion. Discussion questions presented to both general and special education teachers in early focus groups were:

- "What changes are you experiencing in your role compared to your previous teaching experience?" and
- "What changes are you experiencing in your relationships with professionals, peers, support personnel, parents and students?"

In later focus groups, after this issue had emerged in some clarity, the questions became much more specific. And the answers revealed that the lack of clear role definition was a major problem. The general education teachers were asked: "When and how do you collaborate and interact with the special education staff?" "What are your roles and responsibilities with regard to students with IEPs?" "What responsibilities do the IEP teachers have and which do you share?"

The special education teachers in our next focus group echoed the concern of the general education teachers about roles and responsibilities. It was apparent that this issue was central to

successful program coordination and delivering student support in the classroom. Special education teachers were asked to reflect on their support responsibilities and describe when and how they collaborate with the general education teachers. Questions were:

- "Tell me about your collaboration and teaming with general education teachers?"
- "What are the barriers?"
- "What's working and what's not working?"
- "What needs to be changed?"

They were also asked:

- "What is the role of the content teacher in regard to developing the IEP?"
- "What about collaboration and teaming among the special education staff?"

It became quite clear that there were significant disagreements among the general education and special education staff regarding their support roles and responsibilities. The SIOT reviewed the focus group summaries and noted that several key issues needed immediate attention.

- Regularly scheduled, face-to-face contact between general education and special education teachers for planning purposes.
- Clarification of the communication practice for notifying the student's IEP teacher when the student is not succeeding or needs additional support.
- A method for notifying general education teachers about accommodations that have been successful in the past, which accommodations are recommended for a particular class, and the student's relevant IEP objectives.
- Clarification of what special education support options are available and how best to access them.

- What are the primary responsibilities of the IEP manager, content teacher and adviser.

These issues were identified by the project's annual stakeholder surveys as needing continuous attention. Indeed, discussions pertaining to specifying teacher roles and responsibilities take up a large part of SIOT meetings.

SIOT Actions - Roles and Responsibilities

Over the past three years, the SIOT has addressed this issue by engaging in extensive discussions with the content area colleagues they represent. As they bring suggestions and feedback to the SIOT, three specific actions have been taken. These have had a significant effect on improving teacher collaboration practices and the delivery of supports to students in general education content classes. These include:

1) The annual publication and distribution of an Eastlake High School "Inclusive Roles and Responsibilities" brochure. In this publication, general education, special education and advisor roles and responsibilities are listed. These are the result of discussions by the SIOT with input over the past year from teachers in their content area. Recently this brochure was presented and reviewed at a school-wide staff meeting. It is highly regarded by the Eastlake staff.

2) "Support" roles and responsibilities were specifically defined, categorized, and published. These run along a continuum from team/co-teaching, consultation, to monitoring. It became apparent, partly through the focus group discussion, that teachers did not have a common definition of "support." They now have an easy-to-use negotiating tool that spells out the different kinds of support, who will deliver it, and how frequently.

3) A "Quick-mail" electronic notification system was developed by the special education staff as a direct result of teacher concerns about communicating information about failing students. Content teachers complete a brief electronic notice of student progress every two weeks. Since every Eastlake teacher has a desktop computer, this system allows the student's IEP manager to address student support needs quickly and make adjustments as needed. General education teachers have the responsibility to initiate the notice, while the special education teacher has the responsibility to follow-up with the student and initiating teacher.

Establishing Effective Grading Policies and Practices

The issue of grades and grading came to the forefront during teacher, student and parent focus groups. Questions for all three stakeholder groups about the success of students with IEPs probed accountability measures, communication of student progress, and student outcomes. Grades are the primary outcome measure at the secondary level and teachers, parents and students attach a wide range of meanings to them.

Our parent focus group participants discussed grading criteria at length. Three important issues were raised:

1) Some parents were concerned that students were being graded according to an absolute standard with little flexibility or consideration given if accommodations were being provided.

2) Parents questioned the relationship of grades earned to the effort they had seen exerted by their son or daughter. Why were some grades significantly better or worse than in previous years when effort didn't seem to vary?

3) Parents often wanted 'effort' to count as much as test scores. Some students spent countless hours doing homework but could not pass class tests.

Students had many of these same concerns. They feel penalized in classes where tests were weighted significantly more than homework or participation. They also wondered how many accommodations or course modifications they could have and still earn a grade comparable to other students. Students expressed confusion about what an "IEP grade" means and how it affects their postsecondary plans. Some students believed that if they asked for needed disability-related accommodations, they would automatically receive an "IEP" or modified grade. Students are less likely to ask for appropriate accommodations in this environment.

Teachers in the math and science teacher focus group were particularly insightful and pointed that non-math and non-science classes can have more flexible standards by the nature of the content. They implied that students with disabilities can be accommodated more easily in classes other than math and science. They discussed how "more students with IEPs need to accept the value of an 'IEP grade' and respond to the course standards if they want to be graded the same as other students." The special education teachers were also frustrated with the time and energy they devoted to the grading process for students with IEPs. All too often they were intervening at the eleventh hour to rescue a student from a failing grade. It was evident that evaluation and grading needed a coherent policy and systematic practice understood by all Eastlake teachers.

SIOT Actions - Evaluation and Grading

The SIOT undertook a multi-year effort to write and implement grading practices, policies, and strategies that would be accepted by the Eastlake community. Two primary products resulted and are currently being used as the district-wide model.

1) The "Curriculum Modifications and Grading Options for Students with IEPs" is now an integral part of the district-approved grading policy for students in grades 7-12.

This policy statement gives teachers specific guidelines for correlating classroom and curriculum modifications to grading options. This document outlines strategies for the following circumstances: when materials are added, adapted or substituted; when the quantity of class expectations are changed; and when methods for demonstrating mastery/accomplishment or priority goals are altered. In addition, the procedures that staff must follow when a student is going to be assigned an "IEP grade" are carefully detailed. The development and semi-annual staff review of these practices has significantly decreased teacher confusion and general education/special education conflict around this issue.

2) A "Curriculum Modifications and Options Ladder for Students with IEPs" has recently been developed and is being piloted by the SIOT with assistance from project staff. This process provides teachers a series of eight sequential questions which encourage dialogue about what the student is able to do in their class. Each question is followed by curriculum modification recommendations and grading/report card options. We hope that this will become an effective tool as general and special education teachers determine how much modification is required for student success and the grading implications of the modifications. Parents and students should also find this to be a valuable tool for proactive planning.

Focus group findings were instrumental in initiating these evaluation and grading models. The SIOT was confident that they were responding to an area of need. They were responding directly to input from several independent information sources — parents, students and their

professional peers. When the SIOT solutions and models were presented to the faculty, they were confident that stakeholders would value their suggestions. Indeed, that has proved to be the case.

Career/Vocational Opportunities for Eastlake Students

Focus group participants have, without fail, commented on the lack of career/vocational opportunities available at Eastlake. This is especially important to students with disabilities because they attend postsecondary educational settings significantly less often than their nondisabled peers. Eastlake's program options are primarily driven by the needs of college-bound students since the school (and district) is in a very college-oriented, upper middle class community. Also, one of the Coalition of Essential School's principles is that high schools will reflect traditional academic disciplines. The Coalition's "Less Is More" aphorism means that Eastlake's academic core courses drive most program decisions, including what electives are offered.

During both parent focus groups, this issue was raised several times. Both parents of successful and struggling students stated that:

- More vocational or "hands-on" classes and extra curricular activities were needed.
- Eastlake does not respond to the needs of non-college bound students.
- The college prep emphasis gives a negative message to non-college bound students.
- College seems to be the only option considered for Eastlake students.
- They were often unaware of district-wide vocational opportunities or how to access them.

Similar feelings were expressed by student focus group participants — both those with disabilities and those without. They talked about needing more access to vocational opportunities if college was not their goal or for purposes of personal growth and interest.

> *"If you're not going to go to college, then you're most likely going to have a more blue collar job. And this school's not really set up for that."*
>
> *Student with IEP*

During the focus group for tenth graders, students told us their frustration with Eastlake's exclusive focus on four year college preparation. Students planning to attend a community college or vocational/technical school found little information available from their advisors.

Even teachers expressed concern that the community does not recognize that not all Eastlake students are college bound. Participants in the Math and Science teacher focus group discussed their frustration that the school did not offer enough purely vocational classes. They felt that the emphasis on college limits the electives that were being offered. Electives that might be exciting to non-college bound students are not offered because the don't build toward college and support the core curriculum.

> *"That was a deliberate decision, right or wrong, that was made in the founding of the school. The vocational programs are elsewhere. They're available. We're not going to do them here."*
>
> *General Education Teacher*

> *"In math, we're governed by requirements that students need in order to go to college. And certain material needs to be covered in these requirements."*
>
> *General Education Teacher*

Teachers also pointed out that they had difficulty fulfilling their roles as advisors when they were unaware of the full range of occupational opportunities in the school, district and at the postsecondary level.



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SIOT Action - Career/Vocational Opportunities

The SIOT, after being presented with these focus group summary findings, outlined a three point plan designed to address concerns about vocational opportunities. It included:

1) The publication of a "Career/Vocational Opportunities for Eastlake Students" brochure for dissemination to all teachers, students, and parents.
2) The development of a general education/special education cooperatively-run, community-based work experience program.
3) Improved transition planning for all students with disabilities with an emphasis on expanding vocational preparation.

As a result of these efforts more students have participated in school, community-based, and district-wide career/vocational opportunities. Advisors, counselors, and parents are more aware of programs available for all non-college bound students and are able to better assist students in their educational and vocational planning. The Career/Vocational brochure is updated annually and has become the single reference source for teachers and students. It is mailed to all students through the PTSA newsletter and reviewed at every IEP meeting. One of the positive results of this effort was the recognition that there were more opportunities available to students than stakeholders were aware of.

In the preceding examples, information uncovered and clarified in focus groups was used by a planning team to make program improvements or system innovations. We agree with Schwartz, Staub, Gallucci and Peck (1995) that qualitative research helps us "listen more carefully to stakeholders and provide information that is responsive to their culture, values, and

circumstances" (page 104). The teachers who participate on the SIOT are engaged in the reflective decision-making process that effective focus group reporting can so effectively foster.

## Conclusion

Our choice of focus group interviewing as a qualitative tool to promote teacher reflection and influence innovations at the high school level has proved to be very beneficial. It has provided both external constituents and school personnel with insight into effective inclusion-based practices and a process for understanding unified system development. Strong school cultures and vibrant professional development networks create conditions where teachers can share their own knowledge and have independent access from elsewhere (Hargreaves, 1996). Researchers need to become more active, site based players in this process. Focus group interviewing can play a vital part in overcoming traditional barriers that have kept educational researchers, teachers, and program planners too far apart.

This is especially true in the case of large scale educational reform. These reforms, and inclusion is no exception, require fundamental changes in relationships. This includes teachers, administrators, students, and university-based external researchers. Elmore (1996) contends that most of these reform efforts seldom reach, much less influence, long standing teaching practices or patterns. The result can be ineffectual efforts to affect student learning outcomes.

The focus group process that we initiated at Eastlake High School appears to be a highly valued vehicle for assisting stakeholders to turn their philosophical commitment to inclusion into effective policies and practices. Elmore (1996) recommends encouragement and support, access to special knowledge, time to focus on the requirements of the task, and time to reflect and plan with colleagues. Focus group interviewing can provide a sound framework where these practices

are valued and implemented. We believe that Eastlake High School and the research community have benefited greatly from this effort.

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# Appendix A

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THE RESTRUCTURING FOR INCLUSION PROJECT
April 1996

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# Eastlake Tenth Grade Students with IEPs Talk About School

## What do 10th grade students with IEPs like best about EHS?

- Study classes, advisory, and STP Wednesday--provide time to do homework at school
- Freedom
- Notetakers
- Extra help from IEP teachers
- Only having three classes a day
- Progress reports every two weeks help some students stay on track.

## What do students like least?

- Long classes if the teacher just lectures. It is hard to pay attention to a movie or a lecture for 100 minutes.
- Project crunch--all classes seem to have projects due at the same time.
- Homework is hard.
- Freedom. Too much freedom can get sophomores into trouble.
- Notetakers, if the teacher points out to the entire class that the note taker is just for the IEP student. It's embarrassing and puts the IEP student in the position of being asked to share notes with classmates.
- Nearly exclusive focus on four-year colleges. There is very little support for students who are planning to go to Community or Technical Colleges.
- Having student TAs grade projects and tests. IEP students feel they are graded more fairly by their teachers, who know them well.

## What concerns do tenth grade students have?

- Asking teachers for help or accommodations is difficult. Some teachers are easier to ask for help than others.
- The senior project--since it is weighted so heavily and requires a sustained effort--is a big concern.
- The focus on four year colleges. Tenth graders' overriding concern is getting through high school. They feel pressure to choose a career in tenth grade and then select classes on that basis.

*"I'm trying to convince my teachers that I am not going in there to get the easy way out on the test. They think I'm trying to slack off."*

## Testing is major concern for 10th grade students.

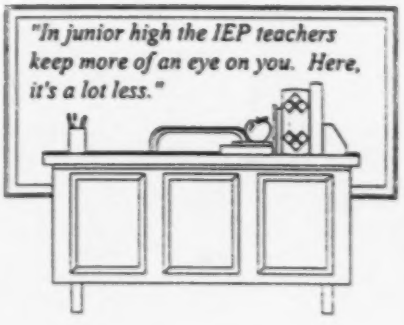
- Students would like more time and more help for tests.
- Teachers are all different in what kind of testing accommodations they will allow. Some will let students leave the room to take tests. Others will not.
- Some teachers require students to have a written note from the IEP teacher in order to take the test out of the room. If you don't know about the test in advance, it can be hard to find an IEP teacher.
- Some teachers will not allow tests to be taken out of the room even with a note from the IEP teacher.
- When teachers give tests by reading the test questions aloud, students can't take the tests out of class. And they have to keep up with the pace of the other students.
- Students are sometimes told that if they receive testing accommodations, they will be assigned an IEP grade. This makes students less likely to ask for needed testing accommodations.
- Many students would like individualized consideration in how tests and homework are weighted for grading purposes. Most would like tests to count less and homework to count more toward the final grade. Some, however, would like the reverse.

## How is high school different than junior high?

- In junior high there is closer contact with IEP teachers. They seek out failing students before they fail.
- Students are required to take more notes. Many sophomores have not learned to take notes and need time and specific help to learn this skill.
- Tests count for a majority of your grade in high school. This is particularly difficult for students who have difficulty with tests.
- Teachers "pile on the work" in high school.
- In junior high the IEP teachers kept track of student's assignments; in high school the students are expected to know what they are supposed to do. While students agree they need to take increased responsibility for learning, they would like a little time to adjust to the change and learn the skills required.

## What instructional practices, accommodations and supports are the most helpful?

- Testing accommodations--taking the test in another room; taking the test with the IEP teacher; reducing the number of problems; more time to take the test; retaking tests after getting feedback from teacher--were mentioned most frequently by the 10th grade students.
- Instruction that involves interaction between the teacher and students. Lots of explanation and teacher mediation of the content being covered.
- Students like it best when teachers explain assignments before asking the student to do the work.
- Getting a personal explanation of the assignment.
- Posting grades regularly so students can check and see if they are missing any assignments promptly.
- Extra time to complete homework.
- Individual support/instruction from IEP teachers to complete assignments or understand material from general education classrooms.
- Study assistance from IEP teachers like writing down definitions and conjectures in geometry.




*This information is derived from focus group discussions with Eastlake Tenth Graders during the 1995-96 school year.*



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# Appendix B

CODES FOR LAKE WASHINGTON RESTRUCTURING PROJECT

Revised 7/8/96

## 1.0 The Community Context

| | |
|---|---|
| INC- ST/CH | Characteristics of students with IEPs. How teachers view these students. (1.2) |
| INTRACT-ST | Desriptions of intractable students. Provides info about students who don't respond despite teachers' concerted efforts to draw students in. (1.2) |

## 2.0 State, District and School Context

| | |
|---|---|
| INC-ADMIN | Administrative action, inaction, procedures that influence inclusion. Includes building and district level. Includes resource allocation issues. (2.3, 3.1) |
| VIS | Comments about the vision, mission, beliefs, philosophy, culture that provide insight into developing a unified system. (2.3, 3.2) |

## 3.0 Systemic Motivations and Attributes

| | |
|---|---|
| INC-DEF | Definitions of inclusion. (3.2) |
| RELT-ST | Relationships between students and teachers, particularly students with IEPs. May include comments about the importance of teacher advocates or of teachers' showing caring attitude. (3.1) |
| REF-TEACH | How gen ed teachers/teaching have been affected by reform and inclusion. (3.1-3.2, 4.2) |
| REF-TEASP | How special education teachers/teaching have been affected. ( 3.1-3.2, 4.2) |

## 4.0 Curriculum and Instruction Outcomes

| | |
|---|---|
| EVAL | Comments about evaluation and grading that provide information about assessing performance/knowledge and grading students with IEPs. (4.3) |
| INC-CURR | How inclusion practices/students interact with the curriculum. Curriculum = content areas like science, math. (4.1) |
| INC-SUP | Specific supports provided to inclusion students. Look for evidence that the intervention is working. (4.3) |
| INC-SUPN | Supports identified as needed or desirable but not currently provided. Look for evidence that the intervention is not working or is not available. (4.3) |

| | |
|---|---|
| INC-TSUP | Supports or information that general education teachers need. These may or may not be in place. (4.3) |
| INSTR-ST | Students' comments about instructional approaches. (4.2) |
| PATT-COL | EHS is focused on the college bound student. Effect on students.(4.1, 5.3) |
| PATT-PROOP | EHS does not offer adequate program options to cover the range of needs of students. Addresses service continuum. (4.1, 5.3) |
| REF-CURR | How reform efforst have affected curriculum. (4.1) |
| SUPINC | Inclusion students' view of support. Includes self-initiating behavior, responsibility and deservedness. Opinions, values, feelings. (4.3) |

5.0 Systemic Supports and Outcomes

| | |
|---|---|
| INC-KNX | General comments (by anyone, about anyone) about understanding and knowledge of special education, inclusion and IEP students. (5.2) |
| PATT-ER | Erasing differences between both staff and students. (5.3) |
| PATT-CONF | There is a conflict between the original vision and the reality.(5.3) |
| PATT-ROLES | Gen and special teachers do not have clearly defined roles. Also addresses ownership and responsibility for students with IEPs.(5.1) |
| PATT-STEP | Inclusion is a step-child of reform. Reform will mitigate the needs of students with IEPs. (5.3) |
| REF-COMM | How use and need forcommunication and teaming have been affected. (5.1) |

6.0 Student Outcomes

| | |
|---|---|
| FUT-ST | Students' comments about their future, after graduation. (6.1) |
| INC-SOC | Social--How inclusion practices affect social relationships. addresses friendships and not relationships that might be associated with academic activities like peer tutoring. Includes extra curricular. (6.1) |
| RELT-SS | Relationships between regular and inclusion students. Includes relationships associated with academics, like peer tutoring. (6.1) |
| SCHINC-ST | Inclusion students' view/opinion of school. (6.1) |
| SUCCESS-ST | Characteristics of successful students. (6.1) |
| UNSUCC-ST | Characteristics of unsuccessful students. (6.1) |

Parents

| | |
|---|---|
| PAR-EXP | Parent expectations of teachers, program and supports in general. (1.1) |
| PAR-ST/CH | Parent descriptions/perceptions of their students/children. (1.2) |
| PAR-IEP | Parent comments about IEP---the document, the process. (4.3) |
| PAR-VW | Parent views of EHS (that don't fit other categories) including general comments about satisfaction. (5.0, 6.0) |
| PAR-COMM | Parent/teacher or school communication. (5.1) |
| PAR-SUC | Parent identification/description of factors that contribute to school success for students with disabilities. (4.3) |